

## IS THIS WHAT DEMOCRACY LOOKS LIKE?

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This essay has been tasked by the editors of this dossier with answering what it would mean should the Occupy movement's contributions to radical democracy permeate contemporary student struggles. This is an interesting, but insufficient, question. Detaching the forms of occupation in the US which emerged in the fall of 2011 from antecedents both in the United States and elsewhere is a messy task, particularly when the discussion centers on student struggles. The acceleration of student struggles in the United States and the return of occupation as a privileged tactic of radical social movements were both underway and interlinked years before the slow transformation of "Occupy Wall Street" (OWS) from tactical imperative to capitalized noun. However much the Occupy movement drew direct inspiration from Medan al-Tahrir (Cairo's Liberation Square) and the *indignados* of Madrid's Plaza del Sol, OWS's political language was cribbed directly unevenly from slogans scrawled on banners, pamphlets, and walls in a series of student occupations of universities in New York City and across California.

These occupations themselves took cues from a transnational current of student revolt and youth militancy that hit the US in the fall of 2008, informed by communication between East and West Coast students and by careful attention to developments in insurgent youth movements in France, Italy, and Greece. Although these occupations took place thousands of miles apart from each other, they emerged from a shared, if contentious, vision of radical refusal and expropriation of the neoliberal university, and initiated a new tactical and ideological phase of struggle within and beyond US campuses. These struggles were not entirely the same as that which developed at Zuccotti Park, Oscar Grant Plaza, Dewey Square, and elsewhere, but neither were they altogether different, subsumed at times unevenly and at times even antagonistically to what their participants viewed as political liberalism and process fetishism in the more mainstream Occupy currents. In what follows I therefore refer both to the Occupy movement as that which erupted out of the Zuccotti Park occupation on September 17, 2011, and to a broader occupation movement whose genealogy I trace below. These intersecting currents have both played an important role in shaping the trajectories of student struggles.

The first New School occupation in Manhattan began less than two weeks after the killing of 15-year-old protester Alexandros Grigoropoulos by Athenian police in the anarchist Exarcheia neighborhood, which ignited a wave of occupation and rioting across Greece. Earlier that fall, the Italian precariat had engaged in mass strikes against neoliberal austerity reforms as an "*onda anomala*" (anomalous wave). Yet, whereas the Italian students who "occupied the university and blocked the city" proclaimed "we won't pay for your crisis," in California their counterparts proclaimed *themselves* the crisis: the living biopower responsible for, produced by, and now unflinchingly against the neoliberal state-university assemblage.<sup>1</sup> Comprehensive histories and analyses of the 2008–2009 occupations and insurrections already exist, some written and published in real time, amidst barricades and tear gas bombs.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of what follows is not to parrot, replace, or synthesize these accounts. Instead, having recognized the convergence between transnational student struggles and the practice of unlimited, infinite occupation of public and private spaces of capital, this essay charts potential post-Occupy futures for student struggles, beginning from the radical breaks the last few years have made possible in what students understand as the limits of what university and school mean—and what power they can have within and/or against educational institutions.

If the purpose of this dossier is to consider the Occupy movement's contribution to "radical democracy," attention to student occupation movements requires broadening both the meaning of that terminology and the presumed direction of knowledge transfer between Occupy Wall Street and student struggles. Discussion of the Occupy movement since its emergence on September 17, 2011, has tended to focus on the genealogy of the General Assembly's prefigurative politics in the alterglobalization movements of the late 1990s and early 2000s and, less frequently, the history of consensus-based

decision making in radical feminist and antiwar organizing from the 1970s forward. <sup>3</sup> The trajectory of student struggles have at times embraced these forms of organization, but elsewhere they have openly rejected and/or challenged them, endorsing the Invisible Committee's insurrectionary exhortation to "abolish all general assemblies" (and/or subsequent critiques of the General Assembly's cultishness and process fetishism made by occupiers of color), and turning instead towards a practice of immanent communization, from which the practice of occupation is inextricable. <sup>4</sup> Such a turn might read as a refutation of the politics of radical democracy, but it can just as easily be understood as an alternative theorization of immanent, extraparlimentary, democratic practice in complex and careful dialogue with the divergent movements and organizations which have taken up the Occupy banner—and in some instances, the Occupy "brand." To ask how Occupy Wall Street's conception of radical democracy might reconstitute student organizing risks missing how student struggles have already both been formative to the Occupy movement's praxis and tactics and also have already presented alternative modes of democratic practice to some of the more overtly populist and liberal interpretations of the Occupy imperative. A unidirectional account of the relationship between occupation and student struggles is not sufficient. The reciprocity between student struggles and broader currents of occupation and communization is key to understanding what an ethics of radical democracy might mean in contemporary student struggles and those to come. Specifically, even as many student movements have embraced the populist, antibank universalism of "the 99%," many have also embraced what we might term, borrowing from the Italian workerist Mario Tronti, a strategy of refusal.

In an influential article taken from his book *Operai e Capitale*, Tronti describes a form of working-class organization that takes on a "wholly alternative content, which 'refuses to function as an articulation of capitalist society,' and thus becomes 'a political crisis imposed by the subjective movements of the organised workers, via the provocation of a chain of critical conjunctures.'" Tronti describes a "tactic of organisation within the structures of capitalist production, but outside of, free from, its political initiative," in which all demands are simplified into the demand for power, the demand for everything, the demand implicit in what Tronti calls the "No." <sup>5</sup> In borrowing Tronti's terminology I mean to suggest neither a uniform turn to Italian workerism, (although the UC student's "we are the crisis" certainly demonstrates the resonance of *Operaismo's* insight that capital is reactive to and attempts to colonize the working class's own historical dynamism and modes of social organization, that crises in capital are crises of capital's control over workers' autonomy) among students in the US nor a simple uniformity of political critique or of tactics. Still, the unflinchingly radical implications of Tronti's "No" (and its echoes in the "no demands" strategy of the second New School occupation and then the broader occupation movement) seem to me a useful way to think about what has been, for many student struggles, not just a refusal of neoliberalism's predatory grasp on university space and on the privatization and "unmaking" of the public university in particular. The space of the university was always itself violently enclosed and never as open or as common as many of its latter-day defenders suggest, and the relationship between universities and capital has long been as symbiotic as it has been predatory. As Andrew Ross has noted, "talk about the 'corporate university' is a lazy shorthand" for the multidirectional exchange and transformations which characterize the "formative stages of a mode of production marked by a quasi-convergence of the academy and the knowledge corporation." <sup>6</sup> Part of what students have explicitly challenged is the collapsing disciplinary edifice of contemporary higher education itself—not only the refusal of authority in the form of administrators and police, dramatized in the meme-ified circulation of high-profile beatings, pepper spray-happy campus cops, and university presidents who frame the governance of the university as akin to being the caretaker of a cemetery—but also the competing imperatives to, on the one hand, save the public university and, on the other, build new structures within its ruins. <sup>7</sup> And perhaps the most important development has been the refusal, too, of student debt as an engine of class formation and discipline, a refusal of the dirty foundation on which knowledge production within the university sits.

As pundits increasingly proclaim the failure and/or death of what they imagine to constitute the Occupy movement, calls toward generalized refusal nevertheless grow louder, and articulate themselves more directly into the practice of student and other forms of struggle transnationally, whether in the form of organizations like the Occupy Student Debt Campaign and Strike Debt or the massive student strike in Quebec during the spring semester of 2012. Without ignoring or discounting the multiple and complex ways in which diverse groups, linked by their subjectivity as students—a term with

disparate meanings governing several different classes of persons across six continents—have negotiated their relationship to the state and the reform/revolution dialectic in a moment of institutional and financial transformation, it seems useful to characterize refusal as a common thread animating much of the most exciting organizing within, beyond, and against the university since the 2007 economic collapse. This refusal has taken the form of strikes (the refusal of work), boycotts (the refusal of patronage), “wildcat marches” and casseroles/cacerolazos (the refusal of the authority of police, the urban landscape, and the liberal teleologies and biopolitics of protest), and walkouts, (the embodied refusal of institutional authority of school administrators and the disciplinary power of schooling) but it has also included more long-term forms of disengagement, escape, and flight. Importantly, examples of the latter include an explosion of knowledge production outside of and beyond the limits of the university, a turn that evokes the autonomous education projects that became popular in the anarchist movement of the early twentieth century as well as some of the more famous tactics of New Left (liberation schools, teach-ins, etc.). Free schools, free universities, reading groups, lecture series, libraries, and theory journals quickly became common features of both campus-based student occupations and the open-air metropolitan occupations that reached the US on September 17, 2011.

It is not entirely surprising that one of the paradigmatic forms to have emerged from this recent wave of occupations is the autonomous space of knowledge production. As the journalist Paul Mason has noted, perhaps the central figure of the occupations and uprisings between 2008 and 2012 was a “new sociological type: the graduate with no future.” For Mason the devaluation of higher education and the “human capital” it produces, coupled with the effects of the global financial crisis, make debt-saddled university graduates and those who see such a subject position as their own future the focal point of a global set of communicable and communicative struggles.<sup>8</sup> So, to talk about the future of student struggles and the Occupy movement is also to talk about the recent history and ongoing afterlives of the Greek riots; the mass occupations in Rome; the impact and legacy of the 2006 French protests against the CPE law (*contrat premiere embauche*);<sup>9</sup> the student occupations in the US in 2008 and 2009; and the wave of occupations across England in the fall of 2010, including the occupations of the University of Leeds, the University of Sheffield, London Metropolitan University and many other schools, and of the Conservative Party headquarters on November 10, 2010. And it is also to talk about the student movements in Chile and Colombia; the long, massive, strike against tuition increases in Quebec in 2011 and 2012; as well as the movements of the so-called “Arab Spring” in North Africa, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, Jordan, and elsewhere, which was the occasion for Paul Mason’s influential blog post.<sup>10</sup> The “classes” held (in scare quotes here because the term seems insufficient) and topics covered in the autonomous education initiatives have been politically heterogeneous to an extent, and so they have been politically contradictory spaces—where antiauthoritarians sometimes reproduce some of the more putatively authoritarian or pedagogical modes (such as lectures), and where antisystemic movements at times reproduce the university’s pseudofeudal divisions of labor and reified star system, while young militants with walkie-talkies coordinate logistics in the face of inevitable state repression. Describing the politics of occupation-derived autonomous education initiatives is also complicated by the multiplicity of such endeavors. Occupy Boston alone had a “Free School University,” made up of expert-fronted “infoshares;” the Howard Zinn Lecture Series, in which eminent radical scholars and writers such as Noam Chomsky, Noel Ignatiev, Bruno Bosteels, Michael Denning, Vijay Prashad, Elaine Bernard, and Norman Finkelstein addressed large crowds; and several small reading groups including, in the interests of full disclosure, a short-lived anticapitalist theory reading group that I convened in January of 2012, after the bulldozing of the Dewey Square encampment by the Boston Police Department.<sup>11</sup>

But if the politics of autonomous education initiatives are contradictory, a politics does nevertheless emerge. Like the occupation movement itself—which has become a strange mixture of anticorporate personhood and antibank sentiments and other liberal populist protest; and a praxis rooted in anarchoinsurrectionist tactics and the communization currents of the European ultraleft—the form is often as important as the content. The panoply of autonomous education initiatives produced in occupation constitute an important element of the praxis of the continuing and diverse occupation movement in their invocation and instantiation of a politics of exit from the capitalist institutions of capture and accumulation. As such there are echoes of French philosopher Henri Lefebvre’s argument that “the quest for a ‘counter-space’ overwhelms the

supposedly ironclad distinction between ‘reform’ and ‘revolution’” and “shakes existing space,” as well as its “strategies & aims,” to “its foundations.” The autonomous university in occupied space as the Lefebvrian “beach,” in which “the body tends to behave as a *differential field* . . . breaking out of the temporal and spatial shell developed in response to labor, to the division of labor, to the localizing of work and the specialization of places,” makes possible a critical pedagogy of space and time. <sup>12</sup>

This critical pedagogy of space and time, is, of course, not limited to autonomous education initiatives, but rather is implicated in the strategy and practice of campus occupations, which have often framed their actions as direct reclamation or expropriation of the spaces of institutional neoliberalism. The occupation of classroom buildings, outsourced cafeteria and graduate student “commons” rearticulates the built environment of the neoliberal university, transforming the prosaic spaces of everyday academic labor into nodal points in a broader agenda of attack on the immediate and diffuse administration and reproduction of an increasingly deterritorialized neoliberal university assemblage. Occupation transforms the campus’s spatial practices. It begins to create a global university of rebellion within and against the global university & capital. Student struggles have been, in part, direct responses to and conflicts over the relationship between capital and university spaces at both the most broadly global and infinitesimally local of registers.

Like the forms of care and reproductive labor that sustained (imperfectly) the outdoor occupations of the “American Fall,” the autonomous education initiatives of the occupation movement represent a reappropriation, a self-expropriation not only of space, but of the cognitive and affective labor of teaching, study, and research by casualized ranks of university labor. Students, contingent teachers, and other inhabitants of the university’s undercommons redirect their labor for purposes contrary to and perhaps outside of the zombified (mutilated and decomposed, but still functioning) body of the neoliberal university. As such, they are important elements of a broader practice of communing, of the commune, which characterizes perhaps the most radical and militant aspects of Occupy’s democratic practice—one at odds with liberal narratives of national redemption and constitutional protest through which some have framed the movement.

Both commons and commune have been important theoretical frames for the occupation movement in the last half-decade. They are not synonymous terms, and emerge from linked but competing political and theoretical tendencies in the Euro-American ultraleft. “Commons” emerges from an autonomist Marxist and postworkerist tradition affiliated with the Italian struggles of the 1960s and 1970s; Antonio Negri and his colleague Michael Hardt are perhaps the most famous theorists to Anglophone readers, along with the Midnight Notes collective and its affiliates: Peter Linebaugh, Marcus Rediker, George Caffentzis, Silvia Federici, and others. “Commons” refers to spaces and things that are controlled neither by capital nor the state, but rather shared, available to and for all. This concept enters the political language of the Occupy movement as something to be defended, or, in more advanced versions such as those articulated by Gigi Roggero and the Edu-factory Collective, to be produced—water as commons, city as commons, and indeed education as commons, or as something that has never been a commons but perhaps should and could be made one through struggle. <sup>13</sup>

The definition of the commune is also somewhat flexible. Its genealogy is the French ultraleft, and its referent is Paris in 1871 more than Berkeley in 1967. <sup>14</sup> “Commune” speaks to the forms of immediate and uncompromised insurrectionary collectivities from which capital and the state are to be attacked, spaces of exodus from the institutions of control, which are also spaces of active revolt. As the Invisible Committee, the anonymous author of *The Coming Insurrection*, a text whose transatlantic circulation played a significant role in the 2008 and 2009 occupations, puts it:

Every wildcat strike is a commune; every building occupied collectively and on a clear basis is a commune, the action committees of 1968 were communes, as were the slave maroons in the United States, or [the Italian *autonomista* pirate radio collective] Radio Alice in Bologna in 1977. Every commune seeks to be its own base. It seeks to dissolve the question of needs. It seeks to break all economic dependency and all political subjugation; it degenerates into a milieu the moment it loses contact with the truths on which it is founded. There are all kinds of communes that wait neither for the numbers nor the means to get organized, and even less for the “right moment”—which never arrives.’ <sup>15</sup> There is some

tension between advocates of the commons and advocates of the commune, in theory and in practice. The latter, proceeding from Marx and Engels' famous assertion in *The German Ideology*, "We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things," cast a politics of the commons as defensive, conservative, nostalgically gesturing towards idealized precapitalist social organization, and fatally underestimating capital's capacity to recuperate and harness sharing, mutuality, and other putatively counterhegemonic activities. <sup>16</sup>

To this, defenders of the commons, like Roggero, stress that it is an inchoate and collectively produced relationship and a nostalgic fetishization of precapitalist forms of sharing—that the commons is instead an act of constant social production. The occupations—and the student movements within and beside them—have gestured towards both perspectives regularly. On the one hand, students and their allies have often sought to proclaim their schools, spaces of student life, and education itself as a commons, as natural or civil right, made possible by collective labor, to which all ought to have equal and free access. On the other hand, student movements have frequently, contentiously embraced (or at the very least flirted with) forms of illegality and expropriation modeled by the camps themselves; in their radical exteriority and oppositionality to the state and capital together, there are clear echoes of the *Tiqqunian* commune, which would have existed even if the earlier wave of student occupations had not explicitly trafficked in the theoretical grammar of the European "communization currents." In this sense the autonomous education initiatives, like the student movements themselves, constitute both commons and commune in multiple and sometimes contradictory senses of both terms. Both strains are evident in the goals and principles of the NYC Free University of September 18–22, 2012: <sup>17</sup>

- To be a cooperative enterprise working for a new form of education that re-defines what it means to be educators and students
- To prefigure a more democratic, horizontal, and radical educational structure
- To empower ourselves, each other, and our communities to become decision-makers in our own processes of self-education
- To expose the inequities of the existing university system
- To intentionally and conscientiously create educational spaces that are anti-oppressive, anti-racist, anti-authoritarian
- To fight against the casualization and precaritization of academic labor
- To join others who see education as a form of direct action by withdrawing from the failing capitalist education system and collaborating in the realization of a more accessible education for all

More generally, student struggles have been at the forefront of pushing the occupation movement away from reformist and electoral impulses, challenging even the doctrine of nonviolence, which has been taken as gospel by left popular movements in the US since the 1970s, and moving toward more confrontational and radical tactics. Against the collapse in universality of the seemingly limitless discursive capacity of the 99%, students have insisted on the crushing singularity of debt, consistently pushing at and exploding the limits of OWS's consensus politics. And if students have pushed the Occupy movement, it has pushed them back. Allie, a computer engineering student at Northeastern University who has been involved in Occupy Boston as a member of the Queer/Trans Direct Action working group, says:

I've met so many students who have been radicalized by Occupy, who previously were devout liberals and progressive democrats, who've found a new language and set of cultural norms stemming from the Dewey Square encampment that have allowed them to completely question the establishment consensus. There's so many damn anarchists now, it's really great. Of course, this has led to a fetishization/aesthetization of anarchism among students, but what else is new. <sup>18</sup>

Student occupations and student occupiers, both in their own actions and in their participation in the citywide occupation, have militated towards more ambitious tactics and more expansive politics, forged in a kind of embodied dialogue with strikers in Quebec and Chile, Colombia, and Cairo. This collective joy in refusal, this "new, subterranean International of



contagious and semi-spontaneous protest,” <sup>19</sup> this transnational commune of the debtor-student and the graduate without future, the dispossessed and the downwardly mobile and the hyperexpropriated lumpen constitute the most potent form. I contend, what will be the enduring legacy of the sustained convergence between student struggles and occupation movements. In every torched debt statement, occupied student lounge, and every book bloc, students create a new political grammar out of the experience of occupation and the affective materiality of the reappropriation of time and space from university administrators, trustees, banks, and police.

Just as student struggles have in many ways structured the potential and politics of the broader Occupy movement (to the extent that one single movement really exists as such), the practice of occupation, and its generalization beyond a student milieu portend a possible shift in what it means to be a student, to think as a student, to rebel as a student. Even as the category of student is increasingly subsumed into a debtor proletariat, some forms of privilege, however attenuated, continue to accrue to many college students and graduates, albeit in an often uneven and graduated manner. Class divisions were evident in many of the Occupy encampments, for instance, between some of the students, particularly those who self-identified as “activists,” and the homeless men and women who also slept in the tents and on the plazas, as well as the gutter punk travelers who constituted an important source of the reproductive labor that sustained the camps, and those who came to Occupy from other struggles than those within the student milieu. Of course, the category of student was itself a striated one. Some students were debt-ridden, others came from wealthy families and wealthier institutions. Some students were themselves homeless, or occupied the role of student in ways that made particular forms of privilege less available to them, as in the case of the undocumented students who have escalated resistance to racialized logics of citizenship and deportation over the past decade. One important instance of autonomous education initiatives largely unrelated to the Occupy movement has been the Freedom University in Athens, Georgia, which was organized in response to the state board of regents’ ban on undocumented students in top-tier state universities. <sup>20</sup>

Allie, the Northeastern student involved with Occupy Boston, further illuminates tensions within student organizing, and between student organizing and the rest of the occupation movement. Allie describes a split between Occupy Boston and a student splinter group, Students Occupy Boston. The latter group held its own General Assemblies, actions, and, for Allie, “occupational headaches.” Allie attributes the divide to “a ‘student identity’, which is itself pretty bourgeois.” Allie continues

[name withheld] (a sometime partner of mine and member of QTDA) has spoken a lot to me about the constructed nature of the student identity, about this period of false-life that exists for college students, where cultural narratives play-out to construct a particular kind of person and inculcate particular kinds of class divisions. <sup>21</sup>

Complicating matters were sectarian conflicts among students. One well-known Trotskyist group was branded “The International Sidewalk Organization” by Boston students after, according to Allie, “attempting to manipulate the language/cultural norms of consensus to get us to stop marching in the streets.” <sup>22</sup> After the Dewey Square camp was cleared and the General Assembly began to fracture, some Boston students formed the Student Anarchist Federation and organized autonomous actions in support of student movements in Quebec and Mexico.

To suggest that the tensions surrounding intra-occupation privileges and hierarchies have withered away is dishonest or delusional. To suggest that they will wither away is utopian in the worst sense of the term; nevertheless, student struggle may very well shift (as some, like the “Dreamers”—those who advocate for the DREAM Act or similar federal policy—who in recent years have occupied politicians’ offices, streets, schools, and other spaces of power, movement, and social reproduction, have already begun to do) from a parochial investment in “student issues” toward broader agendas and radical critiques that might fracture the limits of student subjectivity. Such efforts have the potential to reconstitute the student as political subject, and deal a significant blow to the mixture of privileged alienation, material privation, and anomie that Mustapha Khayati, a Situationist Tunisian student at the University of Strassbourg, termed in 1966 “the poverty of student life” in a pamphlet of the same name that radicals distributed at the university’s ceremony commemorating the beginning of the term. <sup>23</sup> Since the student, Khayati wrote, “is a product of modern society just like Godard or Coca-Cola

his [sic] extreme alienation can only be fought through the struggle against this whole society.” Rejecting the provincialism of campus politics, Khayati continued,

It is clear that the university can in no circumstances become the battlefield; the student, insofar as he defines himself as such, manufactures a pseudo-value which must become an obstacle to any clear consciousness of the reality of his dispossession. The best criticism of student life is the behavior of the rest of youth, who have already started to revolt. Their rebellion has become one of the *signs* of a fresh struggle against modern society.

Perhaps confirming the resonance of Khayati’s student critique of studentification, the text of the pamphlet from which the above excerpt was taken was shouted from the rooftop of 65 5th Avenue during the second occupation of the New School in New York City on April 10, 2009, shortly before police stormed the building, pepper-spraying students and pushing them into the sidewalk. <sup>24</sup> But the wave of struggles that began in 2008 and made possible the generalization of “occupy” as both tactic and ethos urge us not to look to the struggles of the 1960s nostalgically but rather as an object lesson in failure and recuperation. If “research and destroy,” the anonymous authors of the “Communiqué from an Absent Future,” which served as a manifesto for the student struggles in California in the fall of 2009, adopt a critical standpoint similar to that which Khayati undertook in his pamphlet five decades earlier, they do so critically, with the understanding that four decades of neoliberalism and the 2007–2008 economic crisis creates very different terrain for politics. The Communiqué reads:

The poverty of student life has become terminal: there is no promised exit. If the economic crisis of the 1970s emerged to break the back of the political crisis of the 1960s, the fact that today the economic crisis precedes the coming political uprising means we may finally supersede the cooptation and neutralization of those past struggles. There will be no return to normal. <sup>25</sup>

The task, then, for the Californian students who wrote the Communiqué, is “to push the university struggle to its limits.”

“We do not seek structural reforms,” the Communiqué continues. “We must begin by preventing the university from functioning. We must interrupt the normal flow of bodies and things and bring work and class to a halt. We will blockade, occupy, and take what’s ours.” Rather than viewing such disruptions as obstacles to dialogue and mutual understanding, see them as what we have to say, as how we are to be understood.” This trajectory has been an important one. It has been at odds, frequently, with other traditions of organizing, both among students and in broader networks of social movements. Of particular importance is the refusal to issue demands and the complete disavowal of reform: “We must constantly expose the incoherence of demands for democratization and transparency. What good is it to have the right to see how intolerable things are, or to elect those who will screw us over? We must leave behind the culture of student activism, with its moralistic mantras of nonviolence and its fixation on single-issue causes.” <sup>26</sup> The echoes of the Trontie “no” traverse decades and continents.

The familiar, “moralistic” culture of student activism which both the situationists and the Communiqué declaim is, however far from dead. Indeed it continues to play a significant role in student occupation movements and the Occupy movement more broadly. The post-9/17/2011 Occupy movement has been a sprawling assemblage of contradictory and competing political and social formations. For many Occupiers, students, and others, “no demands” functioned less as a political rejection of compromise with capital than it did as a strategic salve for a movement which would fray at the seams as soon as the limits of its political claims became clear. The Occupy movement has its share of Wobblies, labor liberals, greens, Trotskyists, Avakianites, libertarians and members of sundry other political formations. Part of Occupy’s promise lay in its ability to provide a space for a broadly antiauthoritarian radical practice that remained discursively open to such a divergent mass of tendencies. And yet, it seems to be this logic of refusal that emerges from the clearing of the camps on the strongest footing, that continues to grow and travel from city to city and struggle to struggle even as the practice of open, outdoor occupation so central to the popularization of Occupy in the US has clearly waned, stymied by police repression and internal conflict. Such circumstances locate student movements at a crucial crossroads.

It is in the political convergences made possible by the occupation movement that the future of student struggles have begun to emerge. It has become somewhat faddish, as I write this in the summer of 2012, to declare the Occupy movement finished, over. The end of the outdoor occupations of 2011, in this narrative, and the failure of attempts to reoccupy those same plazas and parks, combined with the “failure” to articulate a coherent and strategically focused ideological vision, platform, or set of demands has produced a total collapse and necessitates a return to more conventional modes of politics, be they electoral or Leninist. <sup>27</sup> This is a flawed analysis in many respects. It assumes the Occupy movement both attempted and failed to be a coherent social protest movement aimed at changing the (neoliberal, circumscribed) public’s mind through symbolic protest. It assumes that the “core message” of this movement was anger at the banks and backlash against “money in politics.” These are understandable assumptions, and not entirely incorrect—certainly many Occupiers saw and continue to see their involvement as it was understood by many liberal supporters, as a potential left-wing alternative to the Tea Party, as a grassroots rebellion against the dictatorship of financial capital and the country that Koch bought. But the various occupations were always as much spaces of convergence and cooperation as they were movements in any singular sense. The General Assembly was as fractured, alienating, and contentious as it was a uniting and unifying structure within any occupation. Malik Rahsaan, the founder of Occupy The Hood” has called the General Assembly a “tourist attraction.” <sup>28</sup> Malcolm Harris, present at the very first planning General Assembly for what would become the Zuccotti Park occupation months later, identified significant conflicts over the meaning and politics of consensus from inception of the Occupy movement, and alleged that consensus was being used as a means of control “The General Assembly has become a tool of imposed accountability,” writes Harris, “treating consensus as if it were a way to implement policy upon a population.” <sup>29</sup> Other Occupiers have concurred with the sentiment that the General Assembly held a sometimes counterproductive and always overdetermined role. As a group of Atlanta Occupiers have suggested, “the primary organizational form of 2011 was not the Assembly. The primary organization form of 2011 was the commune.” <sup>30</sup> That is, it was never the Assembly, but rather the space for and act of finding each other, of taking space from capital and the state, of building forms of collectivity in the midst of what is less a crisis than the business-as-usual of an increasingly punitive form of (post)neoliberal governmentality.

And yet, contrary to narratives of Occupy’s decline and disappearance, the landscape of student struggle has not been one of deceleration and collapse. Indeed, far from it. Instead, forms of autonomous education have multiplied, notably, in popular “free university” splinter occupations like that which took place in New York City’s Madison Square Park on May 1, 2012, just steps away from the Baruch College building where, six months earlier, New York City police attacked CUNY students protesting tuition increases with nightsticks. <sup>31</sup> The movement against student debt also continues to gain momentum, both in its liberal forms (petitions for loan forgiveness), in the important and more radical call by the Occupy Student Debt Campaign for a debt strike—a call which typifies the spirit of refusal, of radical abolition—and in the form of the massive student strike in Quebec, which has expanded to what the Manifesto of CLASSE (Coalition large de l’Association pour une Solidarité Syndicale Étudiante), the radical syndicalist wing of the movement, calls a “social strike,” a strike against not only the state’s attempt to discipline students and precarious youth through debt, but also against broader mechanisms of domination:

History has shown us eloquently that if we do choose hope, solidarity and equality, we must not beg for them: we must take them. This is what we mean by combative syndicalism. Now, at a time when new democratic spaces are springing up all around us, we must make use of these to create a new world. Now is no time for mere declarations of intent: we must act. In calling for a social strike today, we will be marching alongside you, people of Quebec, in the street tomorrow. In calling for a social strike today, we hope that tomorrow, we will be marching, together, alongside the whole of Quebec society. <sup>32</sup>

There is no reason to suspect that student struggles will not continue to grow, to push at the boundaries of organization and form, and the limits of conventional schema of social and student movement theory in much the way they have in the last few years. Perhaps this exultant, but not overweening, confidence, this sense that it is both possible and right to attack every aspect of the extant organization of higher education, to find the commune beneath the university, is the most



valuable lesson from the Occupy movement for student struggles moving forward. <sup>33</sup> The recent occupations of the top floor of the foundation building at Cooper Union by students outraged at university administrators' plans to charge tuition for the first time in the storied institution's history, and of UC Berkeley's Eshleman Hall to fight administrative "plans to cut support for the recruitment and retention of students of color," suggest that occupation will continue to play a central tactical role in continuing student struggles. <sup>34</sup> Both of these occupations also provoke the beginnings of serious conversations on the future strategy of campus and other occupations. What would it mean to occupy not as a defensive practice of holding space, but rather, as Willie Osterweil advocates, as part of an expanding strategy of organizing, of growing the scale and the reach of struggles? <sup>35</sup>

We need to move beyond reacting (to the police, the banks, administrations or governments) and begin to start acting. We build something just to defend it? We should be building occupations, groups and movements that can be immediately deployed to build bigger ones, even if it means risking [the] destruction [of these initial occupations and groups.]

Osterweil's comments sketch the outlines of conversations which will continue as student and other struggles explore the limits of extant organizational forms. For many in the broader occupation movements the occupation itself was always understood as a "partial and transitory" rupture in capitalist space and time, the collapse of any particular occupation was an invitation to occupy new spaces and to "establish new kinds of collective bonds" which were to be "the real basis of our struggle." <sup>36</sup> The point was not to sustain any particular occupation or occupations but instead to generalize the occupative takeover, the human strike (in *Tiqqun's* opaque Agamben-inflected language "the insurrection where there is nothing but, where we all are, *whatever singularities*." <sup>37</sup>) This work continues. What shape future occupations and struggles take is what will really define the promise – and the limits of occupation's radical politics. The most urgent question which our struggles face, then, is one which can only find answers in practice. If the imperative remains "occupy everything," the resulting implication that everything is occupiable, every space is a potential laboratory of new forms of revolt, means that we need look nowhere else for our "absent future" than everywhere.

## Footnotes:

1. On Italy, see Gigi Roggero and Paolo Do, "We Won't Pay for Your Crisis! Anomalous Wave, Living Knowledge, and the Common Institutions," *European Alternatives: Democracy, Equality, Culture Beyond the Nation State*, <http://www.euroalter.com/2010/we-wont-pay-for-your-crisis/>. On California, see "After the Fall," Pamphlet, [afterthefallcommuniques.info](http://afterthefallcommuniques.info) 2010, and Evan Calder Williams, "We Are the Crisis," *Socialism and/or Barbarism* (blog), September 24, 2009, <http://socialismandorbarbarism.blogspot.com/2009/09/we-are-crisis.html>. On Greece, see *We are an image from the future*, eds. Tasos Sagris, A. G. Schwartz, and Void Network (New York: Verso, 2010). ↩
2. See, for instance, "After the Fall" Pamphlet on the Californian occupations, and on the first New School occupation, "Pre-Occupied: The Logic of Occupation," 12/2008. <http://reoccupied.files.wordpress.com/2009/04/preoccupied-reading-final.pdf> accessed 5/27/2012 ↩
3. For a valuable history of consensus in radical movements in the US, see Andrew Cornell, *Oppose and Propose: Lessons from a Movement for A New Society* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2011). ↩
4. The Invisible Committee is the anonymous author of the pamphlet *The Coming Insurrection*, affiliated with the ultraleftist journal *Tiqqun*, and is perhaps the best-known proponent on the international stage of communization theory, a mode of communist politics that resists both transition and mediation, and that demands immediate communization through insurrectionary expropriation of capitalist production. The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, <http://tarnac9.wordpress.com/texts/the-coming-insurrection/>. Also see Rebecca Burns "As Occupy the Hood National Gathering Concludes, Questions About Race and Occupy Persist," *In These Times*, *Uprising Blog*, July 27, 2012 [http://inthesetimes.com/uprising/entry/13586/as\\_occupy\\_the\\_hood\\_national\\_gathering\\_concludes\\_questions\\_about\\_race\\_and\\_occupy/](http://inthesetimes.com/uprising/entry/13586/as_occupy_the_hood_national_gathering_concludes_questions_about_race_and_occupy/). ↩

5. Mario Tronti, "The Strategy of Refusal," from *Operai e Capitale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1965), reprinted by Libcom.org, <http://libcom.org/library/strategy-refusal-mario-tronti>. ↵
6. For a history of the relationship between universities and capitalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Clyde Barrow, *Universities and the Capitalist State: Corporate Liberalism and the Reconstruction of American Higher Education, 1894–1928* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), and Andrew Ross, "The Rise of the Global University," in *Towards an Autonomous Global University*, The Edufactory Collective (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2009). ↵
7. Deborah Solomon, "Questions for Mark Yudof: Big Man on Campus," *New York Times Magazine*, September 24, 2009. Yudof states, "[B]eing president of the University of California is like being manager of a cemetery: there are many people under you, but no one is listening. I listen to them." ↵
8. For a critical reading of Gary S. Becker's human capital theory, see Morgan Adamson, "The Human Capital Strategy," *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization* 9, no. 4 (2009), <http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/9-4/9-4adamson.pdf>. ↵
9. The CPE law, the successful struggles against which have been an important touchstone for some of the ultraleftist currents that played an important role in both the Occupy movement in the US and its student occupation antecedents, allowed employers to fire workers under the age of twenty-six at any time during the first two years of their employment, deregulating, or, more properly, precarizing the labor market and producing youth as a particularly precaritized class of workers. ↵
10. Paul Mason, "Twenty Reasons Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere," *BBC News Idle Scrawl Blog*, February 5, 2011, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/newsnight/paulmason/2011/02/twenty\\_reasons\\_why\\_its\\_kicking.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/newsnight/paulmason/2011/02/twenty_reasons_why_its_kicking.html). On the storming and trashing of Tory headquarters see, for instance, "Student Fees Protest: This Is Just the Beginning," *The Guardian*, November 10, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/nov/10/student-fees-protest-conservative-hq> accessed 5/27/2012. On the CPE law, see, among others, Carlo Vercellone, "Anti-CPE Movement and Cognitive Capitalism," *Edu-factory.org*, April 18, 2007, [http://www.edu-factory.org/edu15/index.php?view=article&catid=43%3Afirstround&id=100%3AAnti-cpe-movement-and-cognitive-capitalism&format=pdf&option=com\\_content&Itemid=72](http://www.edu-factory.org/edu15/index.php?view=article&catid=43%3Afirstround&id=100%3AAnti-cpe-movement-and-cognitive-capitalism&format=pdf&option=com_content&Itemid=72) accessed 12/14/2012 ↵
11. The Denning lecture broke the mold by transforming itself into a militant reappropriation of the conference panel, including presentations from two graduate students, Eli Jelly-Schapiro and Drew Hannon, on the cultural politics of debt. ↵
12. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1991): 383–385. I thank Johana Londoño for directing me to this passage. ↵
13. For examples of contemporary radical commons theory see Roggero and Do, "We Won't Pay for Your Crisis!"; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), and also Peter Linebaugh, *Magna Carta Manifesto* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). ↵
14. The discursive shift to "commune," made most dramatically by the Occupiers of Oscar Grant Plaza in Oakland, California, derives in part from the French insurrectionary milieu of *Tiqqun* and the Invisible Committee's *The Coming Insurrection*. ↵
15. *The Invisible Committee, The Coming Insurrection*. ↵
16. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (1846), Chapter 1, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm>. For the communist critique of the commons see, for instance, Evan Calder Williams, "Fire to the Commons," in *Communization and Its Discontents: Contestation, Critique, and Contemporary Struggles*, ed. Benjamin Noys (New York: Minor Compositions/Autonomedia, 2011) ↵
17. S18–22 Free University Announcement, *New York City General Assembly*, September 2012, [WWW.NYCGA.NET](http://WWW.NYCGA.NET) September 2012. ↵
18. Allie, interview by author via Facebook messages, June 3, 2012. ↵

19. Jasper Bernes, "Square and Circle: The Logic of Occupy," *The New Inquiry*, September 17, 2012, <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/square-and-circle-the-logic-of-occupy/>. ↵
20. Freedom University, <http://www.freedomuniversitygeorgia.com/index.html>. ↵
21. Allie, interview. I have withheld the name of Allie's comrade/sometime partner because I did not speak to her or obtain permission from her to have her name appear in this article. ↵
22. *Ibid.* ↵
23. U.N.E.F. Strasbourg, "On the Poverty of Student Life", pamphlet, 1966, text reproduced at <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/Sl/en/display/4/> (*italics in original*). Macy Halford, "New School Occupied: A Pamphlet for All Times?", *The New Yorker*, Page-Turner Blog, April 15, 2009, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2009/04/riot-at-the-new.html>. ↵
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25. Research and Destroy, "Communiqué from an Absent Future," September 24, 2009, <http://wewanteverything.wordpress.com/2009/09/24/communique-from-an-absent-future/>. ↵
26. Research and Destroy, "Communiqué from an Absent Future," September 24, 2009, <http://wewanteverything.wordpress.com/2009/09/24/communique-from-an-absent-future/>. ↵
27. E.g., Alexander Cockburn, "Biggest Financial Scandal in Britain's History, Yet Not a Single Occupy Sign; What Happened?" *Counterpunch*, July 6-8, 2012, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/07/06/biggest-financial-scandal-in-britains-history-not-a-single-occupy-sign-what-happened/>. ↵
28. Rebecca Burns, "As Occupy the Hood National Gathering Concludes." ↵
29. Malcolm Harris, "Baby, We're All Anarchists Now," *Jacobin*, October 12, 2011, <http://jacobinmag.com/blog/2011/10/baby-were-all-anarchists-now/>. ↵
30. Black Sabot, "Some Notes on the Atlanta Commune," Atlanta Independent Media Center, June 10, 2012, <http://atlanta.indymedia.org/local/some-notes-atlanta-commune>. ↵
31. "CUNY Students Protesting Tuition Increase Clash with Police," *New York Times*, November 21, 2011. ↵
32. "Share Our Future: The CLASSE Manifesto," trans. Tamara Loring, *Together, Let's Stop the Hike*, June 2012, <http://www.stopthehike.ca/2012/07/share-our-future-the-classe-manifesto/>. ↵
33. I would like to thank Rana M. Jaleel, Johana Londoño, and an anonymous reviewer for their comments and edits on this article, and Allie from Occupy Boston for sharing some thoughts about the direction of the movement with me in the spring of 2012, as well as so many others whom I have had the good fortune to march and struggle with in New York City and Boston. ↵
34. Students for a Free Cooper Union, "Students for a Free Cooper Union Lock-in to Cooper Union's Foundation Building to Preserve Free Education," C U \$ O \$, December 3, 2012 <http://www.cusos.org/students-for-a-free-cooper-union-lock-in-to-cooper-unions-foundation-building-to-preserve-free-education-2/> a, "Update: Eshleman Hall Barricaded in Defense of Multicultural Student Spaces." *Reclaim UC* (blog) November 27, 2012 <http://reclaimuc.blogspot.com/2012/11/eshelman-hall-barricaded-in-defense-of.html> ↵
35. Willie Osterweil, "Solidarity Means Attack," *Wasted Ideology* (blog) December 13, 2012 <http://wastedideology.blogspot.com/2012/12/solidarity-means-attack.html> ↵
36. Research and Destroy, "Communiqué from an Absent Future." ↵
37. "How is it to be done," *Tiqqun*, November 2008. <http://tarnac9.files.wordpress.com/2009/01/how-is-it-to-be-done.pdf> 18. ↵